

# AN INTRODUCTORY APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF ENGLISH

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## Abstract

Over the last decades, new approaches to language teaching are aiming for a more participative and interactive language experience. Moreover, an increasingly globalised world fosters interaction between different cultures. Bearing these facts in mind, this paper firstly examines the generally poor level of intercultural awareness that there exists amongst secondary school students. Secondly, it focuses on the potential positive effects that an approach to cultural elements in the FL class would perform on our students and on our society. Thirdly, it suggests some ideas to implement culture teaching in the classroom. In fast-changing societies such as ours, we need highly culturally competent individuals to face the challenges to come, and an appropriate way to do this is through language education.

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**Keywords:** Language, teaching, English, culture, communication

## Introduction

This project focuses on the teaching of foreign cultural elements in the language classroom. We believe that the role of cultural elements has been underestimated by teachers, textbooks and other methods of teaching languages over the last decades, when the goal of successful language learning was thought to be achieved by focusing on different parts of the language such as vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, or, more specifically, grammar. These parts were artificially separated from each other, expecting the student to make sense of them one by one to then link them altogether in a communicative situation. Nevertheless, in this project we will defend the teaching of a language (more specifically, the English language) in a more natural and holistic way, in which culture plays an important role as motivator as well as a provider of contextual information of the language used in real communication.

## I

What do we understand by “culture”? According to Brown, “Culture is a way of life. It is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others”. That is, it is something learnt by individuals during their lives. There are many examples of a close relationship between the way in which we see the world and the language we use.

In order to acquire communicative ability, it is not enough to have linguistic abilities, which are the ones pursued by language teachers for many years. Byram (1997: 10) differentiates six different competences that take part in communicative ability. Moreover, besides this series of competences, whenever we communicate with other people we bring out our own system of values, beliefs, prejudices and so on, and we decode the messages received through those same filters in the communication process. That is to say, the communication process is not as direct as we may think, since the messages are going through such filters, which are learnt throughout our lives based on our cultural background and personal experiences.

As can be seen, the communication process is not a simple one between people of a similar background, let alone a communication process in a real context with people of a different culture to ours. In a real context, our communicative ability competences must be

stronger in order to foresee, amend and overcome misunderstandings and to get our meaning across. For this reason, we must make our students aware of these difficulties, equip them with the tools to overcome them and guide them in the process of their Second Culture Acquisition. Getting to know other cultures and questioning one’s own values will certainly not provide the key to intercultural communication. However, questioning one’s own systems of beliefs and integrating others’ points of view will be enriching and enlightening not only for the sake of intercultural communication, but also for our students’ personal growth.

In order to acquire a second culture one goes through several steps. Hammer et al. (2003) created a psychometric assessment for Bennett’s “Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity” (1986). Bennett’s model described the different phases people go through when in contact with other cultures. The phases the authors described were the following ones: *denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance and adaptation*.

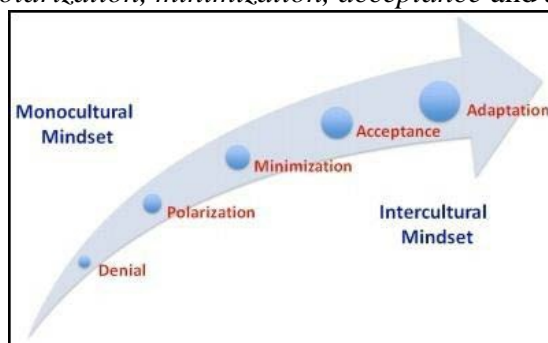


Figure 1: Intercultural Development Continuum

Hofstede et al. (2010) carried out studies on national cultures of many countries to then compare them. They compare the data of 76 countries, bearing in mind the following criteria: *Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint*. These pairs are evaluated individually in each country to then be given a score (based on the average score of all individuals evaluated), which tells in which part of the band scale for that criterion the average person in that country is.

The British anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1976) formulated a theory in which he established an analogy between different cultures and an iceberg. According to this theory, as in an iceberg, most of the cultural conventions remain beneath the surface and are not seen in a superficial observation, while the part that is easily observable is actually a very small percentage of the whole. The parts that we can see are people’s behaviours, material productions and physical/tactile things, that is, the most superficial items of a culture. However, the largest part is the deep structure, which remains beneath the surface: Notions of self, Importance of Time, Assumptions, Learning Styles, Attitudes towards Social Status, and many more. Whenever people from different cultural backgrounds get together, the part of the iceberg beneath the surface is the one that causes clashes and problems. This is represented in Figure 2 below.

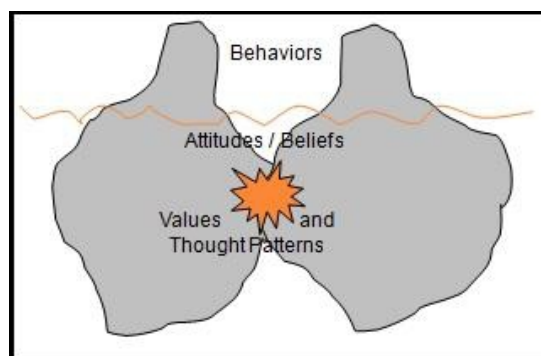


Figure 2: Cultural icebergs

A different approach towards language learning and acculturation is John Schumann's theory of Social Distance (1976). In his theory, *social distance* implies a certain degree of dissimilarity between two cultures when they come into contact within a person. Social Distance is relevant to us as teachers of a foreign language because the more the social distance, the more difficulties students will encounter when learning the foreign language. Moreover, if there is a relation of dominance of one culture over the other, there will not be a *good* learning situation.

Although Spanish society is rather homogeneous compared to other countries, we do have contact with other cultures without the need to go as far as to the US or even cross the borders of the country. For this reason, we believe that this project of integrating language and culture teaching in the language classroom (English language in our case) should transcend the academic setting, encouraging our students to improve their acculturation skills in the society around them.

The methodology used in this research has been interpretative and qualitative. The research tools used were questionnaires delivered to 4 different groups of students studying at 4 different levels in secondary education. The questionnaires were in Spanish, consisted of 3 sections, and students were asked to choose between 4 numeric answers (instead of 5) in order to avoid central tendency bias. The analysis of these questionnaires has been interpretive analysis of qualitative research, for the reasons mentioned earlier.

The study has been carried out at *I.E.S. Auringis* (Jaén), in four different groups of students, each of them studying at a different level. The groups ranged from 3rd of ESO until 2nd of Bachillerato, which was, out of the 4, the only non-bilingual group. There were a total of 102 students, distributed between the groups, as can be seen in the table. The results drawn from our questionnaire analysis are specific to our particular context, and, in order to make generalisations to other groups of students, schools and geographical areas, further research would be required.

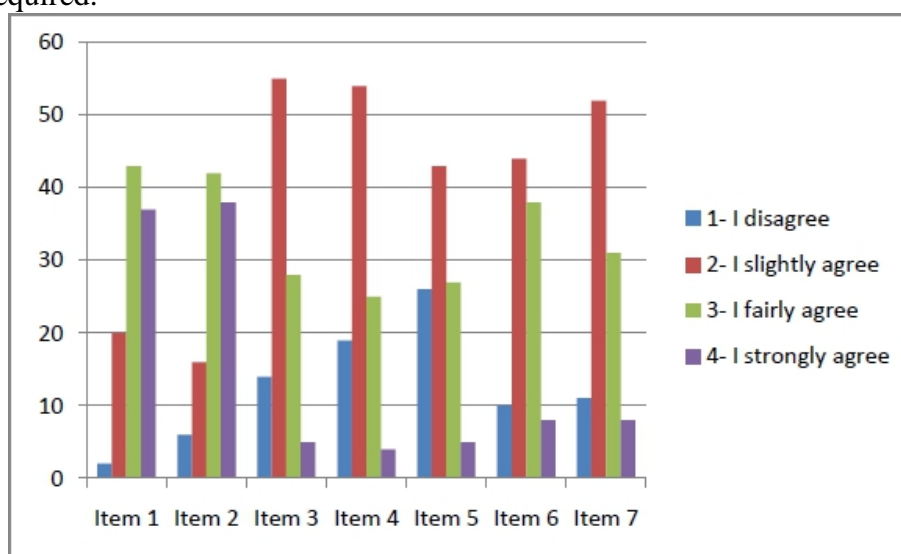


Figure 3: Global results for section 1, part 1 (items 1-7)

As can be seen in this figure, most students agree with item 1 about the importance of learning culture when learning English. There is also a tendency for these students to do activities in English during their free time. The evaluation of the other items, which asked students about their textbook and other materials and their knowledge of different cultures, has not been as positive, from which we can infer that although there is a strong motivation to learn culture, their actual knowledge and the elements with which they learn are not regarded positively.

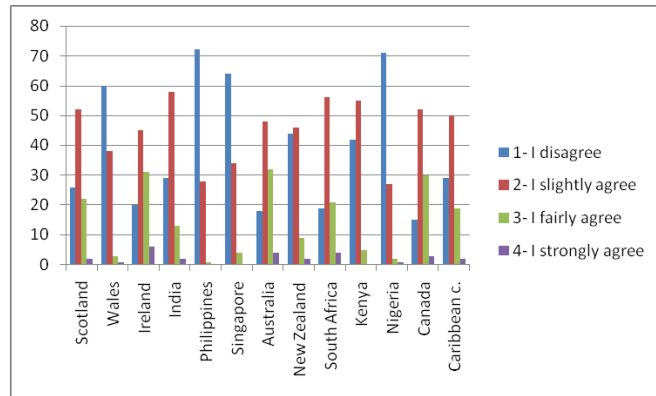


Figure 4: Global results for section 1, part 2 (items 8-12)

This figure shows how the information given to the students about the different countries (other than England and the US) is not the same for all. While emphasis is placed on some countries such as Ireland, Australia and South Africa, other countries, such as Philippines, Nigeria, or Singapore have obtained very low results.

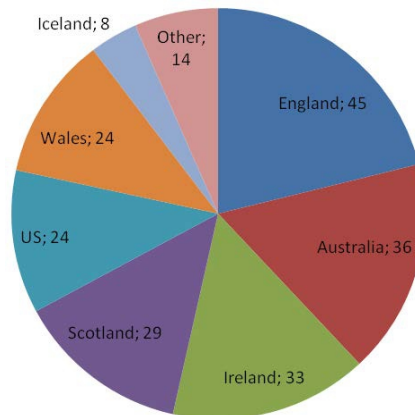


Figure 5: Global results for section 1, part 2 (item 13)

In Figure 5 we find the distribution of the information in the textbook for the different countries, according to the students’ perceptions. For example, we may focus on the position of the US, which is one of the countries which are low rated, and Canada, which is one of the countries included under the term “other”.

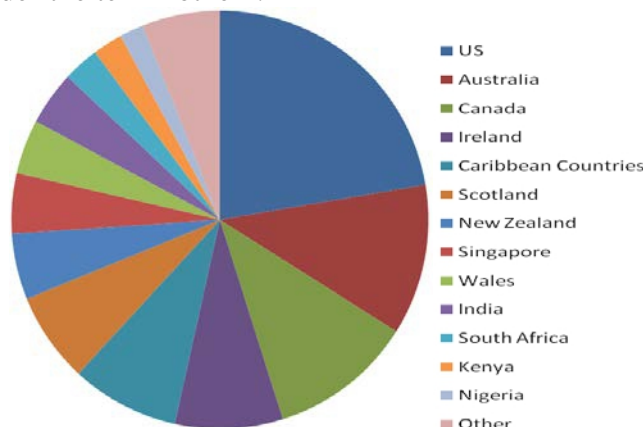


Figure 6: Global results for section 1, part 2 (item 14)

Figure 6 shows the countries about which students would like to learn more. The US is the first one, and Canada is third in the rating, despite having a very low relevance in the textbook, from which we infer that textbooks do not necessarily match students’ interests.

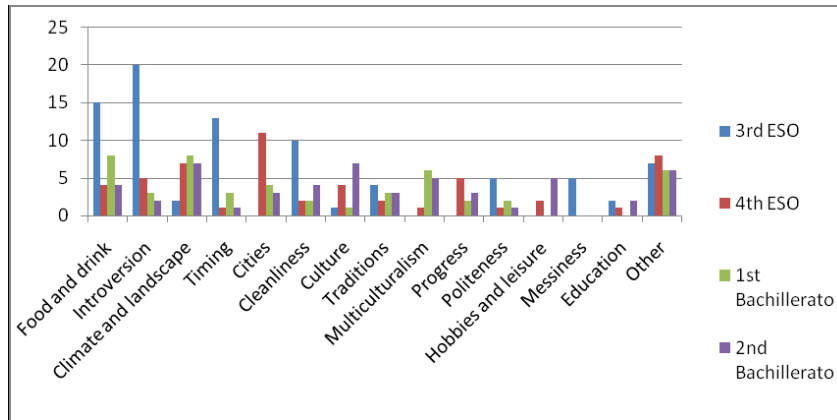


Figure 7: Global results for section 2 (item 1)

We asked our students to mention the three most prominent features of England, and this figure shows the results. The most mentioned features are food and drink, the introversion of the English people, and climate and landscape. The overall results match stereotypes, which were confirmed when they were asked about the English people. Then they were asked whether they would consider that the English and Spanish cultures are similar, and the results are the following:

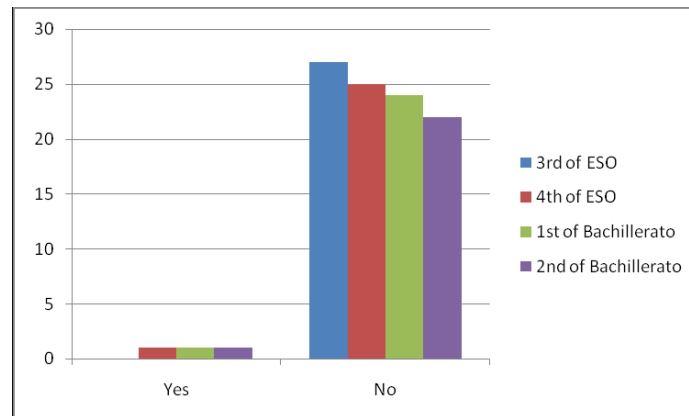


Figure 8: Partial results for section 2 (item 2)

These data show that the students evaluated would be in a phase of *polarization* using Hammer et al.’s term, that is, having a strong feeling of *us* versus *them*, rather than focusing on the similarities between the two cultures.

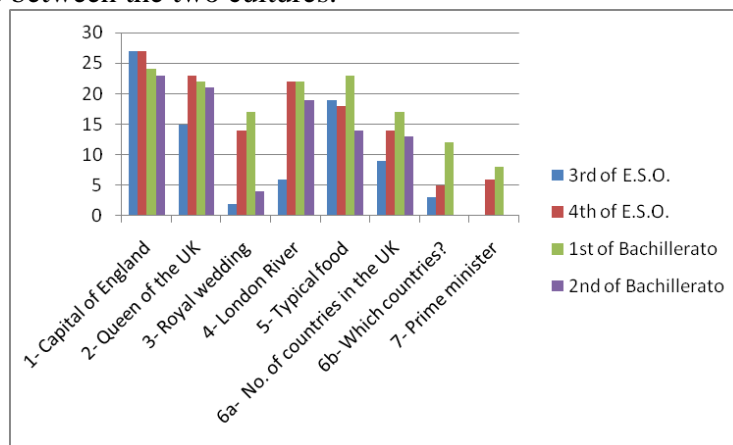


Figure 9: Correct answers for section 3

In the *Quiz about English culture*, 1st of Bachillerato students were the ones who had a higher number of correct answers, followed by 4th of E.S.O., 2nd of Bachillerato, and 3rd of E.S.O. These results follow a tendency already seen in previous items.

## Conclusion

The students who participated in our study have, in general, the motivation and autonomy to be direct and active participants of their own English language learning process. The majority of the students spend time at home using English in their leisure time led by an intrinsic motivation that has nothing to do with school or grades.

Yet, the results obtained in the different sections of our questionnaire are lower than expected and lead us to conclude that the culture of the English-speaking world is neither sufficiently nor appropriately taught in EFL lessons in Secondary Education.

If oversimplified and, in many cases, wrong pictures of England constitute our students' knowledge of England and its culture (about which, for geographical, political and sociological reasons they have received a higher amount of information than they have received from other countries), what can be expected about their degree of knowledge concerning other countries? Do we want our students to know about a tiny percentage of all the cultures in our world (just because the values to which they grant priority coincide with ours), or do we want them to know about the existing variety of cultures and to help them to form a personal critical opinion of these countries by themselves?

Hughes' (1986) ideas for educators to raise cultural awareness amongst students in EFL classrooms include: *The Comparison method, Culture assimilators, the Culture capsule, Drama, Audiomotor unit or Total Physical Response, Newspapers, Projected media and The culture island.*

To these useful and practical ideas we would add the following:

1. Participation of the English class as a whole in special days of the year that are related to multiculturalism or to other countries' traditions
2. Interdepartmental collaboration between the English department and other departments
3. Thematic week: one week, one country
4. International Bazaar

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